

FINAL  
REPORT

**Qualitative Assessment  
of the SITT Values and  
Ethics Statement**

**Presented to:**

Industry Canada

March 2004

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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

## 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

In April 2003, Industry Canada's Management Committee approved a "Modern Comptrollership" plan that proposes a "decentralized, bottom-up and flexible approach to modern comptrollership", in which values and ethics were identified as one of four priorities. The ensuing research report presents the findings of a qualitative research process conducted with a number of Industry Canada's Spectrum, Information Technologies and Telecommunications (SITT) sector employees that was designed to provide internal feedback on the adequacy of the sector's current values and ethics statement, and to qualify possible revisions to this statement where judged necessary.

This process consisted of four focus group discussions conducted among current employees of the different SITT branches. All groups were held in February 2004 among both Anglophone and Francophone participants. **The reader of this report is reminded that the methodology employed in this study is qualitative in nature, and therefore should not be construed as representative of the larger population of federal public servants or of SITT employees in any *statistically representative* manner. The consistency in findings from group to group in this process does, however, suggest that we may have confidence in the general validity of the findings reported herein.**

## 1.1 OVERVIEW

The following constitute the general findings relative to how SITT employees view the current values and ethics statement:

- Most participants endorsed the specific values and ethics articulated in the current statement as the “right ones”, and felt that the provisions therein are appropriate to the sector, despite the fact that the document dates back more than a decade.
- Generally, the majority of participants consider their current workplace environment to reflect a faithful and diligent adherence to these principles, and would restrain their criticisms of the document to the level of language – suggesting an updating of specific clauses, and some changes here and there to wording, but no substantive re-working of the document as a whole.
- A vocal minority of participants dissent from the general view, and pointedly argued that while the values and ethics spelled out in the document may, in fact, be appropriate, much in their current workplace environment is *at odds* with what the statement prescribes. For these participants, the issue is not so much in the *articulation* of the values and ethics, but rather management’s commitment to them. This point of view, although a minority one, was present in every group. Occasionally, this was a point of view expressed with some irony, and in other cases, with considerable animosity, particularly as they relate to the values and ethics that prescribe how management values and treats its human resources.
- Overall, most participants would agree that the current statement would benefit from some changes. Minimally, small changes in wording here and there would improve the overall clarity of the piece. In other cases, more substantive changes would be required to modernize the statement, and to bring it into closer harmony with the current activities of the SITT.

The reader should note as well that this process was clearly impacted by the current climate in Ottawa, and more specifically with respect to current scandals and their impact on the relative weight of such principles as transparency and probity. Predictably, these concerns emerged as front and center among participants’ preoccupations, and clearly impacted on the relative weight accorded to the different types of values and ethics articulated in the current statement.

Also impacting the views expressed in the focus groups conducted were recent organizational and classification changes within certain branches of the SITT.

## 1.2 CLAUSE-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Much can be gleaned from participants' commentary and critique of the individual clauses in the current values and ethics statement, as these provide insight into the more important findings. The following general findings emerge as important:

- That the value or ethical standard be appropriate and specific to the SITT's specific role and mandate. Brevity and concision would demand that the SITT values and ethics statement would be constrained in this manner, given that other values and ethics-related documents and standards exist for public servants as a whole.
- That the standards *differentiated* so as to make the distinction between ethics and values clear. The former (ethics) should be articulated as immoveable standards of conduct that prescribe employee behavior as it is currently. Values, for their part, should have an *aspirational* quality, and be articulated as *goals* rather than standards of current behavior.

The following clause-specific findings emerged:

- **Leadership:** This general topic and the specific aspects of leadership were considered to be important, but not essential to this values and ethics statement. In most groups, the general view was that this clause would be more appropriate for a SITT mission statement than for a values and ethics statement. Participants were generally in favor of its removal.
- **Client Focus and Quality Service:** This clause was deemed important in that it touches on specific aspects of how the SITT measures and recognizes its value and its overall performance. By the same token, most participants also recognized that this particular orientation to client satisfaction is now inappropriate for a group that has a mandate as broad as the SITT's. Participants suggested that while some outward oriented aspect should remain in the values and ethics statement, this aspect should be re-cast in a manner that is more compatible with the broad (and often regulatory) mission of the sector.

- **Innovation and Continuous Improvement:** Participants seemed generally at ease with the *aim* that is implied here, and at the same time very conscious of the lack of resources that constrain what means are applied to this end. It would appear that the imperative is to separate and differentiate between innovation and continuous improvement as it relates to people and as it relates to SITT processes. While the former may be problematic in the current climate of budget restrictions (and what many describe as frugal management policies when it comes to providing training for personnel), most everyone conceded that the SITT can and should continue to improve and innovate in how it conducts its work.
- **Commitment to Employees:** This was clearly the most controversial of the clauses, and largely due to the view among some that the SITT currently does not live up to these values. The problems here are a function of resources (or lack thereof) or perhaps of organizational culture. Specific issues arose with respect to a variety of human resource related practices (evaluations, hiring procedures, etc.) and official languages, among others. Although most participants were clear in their expectation that any values and ethics statement have some form of inwardly oriented clause, it was clear that any new articulation of such values should aim at a more realistic objective.
- **Teamwork and Delegation / Communications and Consultation:** Generally, this clause was also at issue because of the contrast between the aim that is implied in the document, and what is perceived to be the internal reality. Despite these concerns, however, our discussions suggest that these particular aspects are but one or two angles or aspects of an inwardly focused value set, and that they are subservient to the notion of commitment to employees and could be reasonably addressed in a general clause on this topic.

### 1.3 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this process suggest a clear prescription for a re-write of the current values and ethics statement. Minimally, our findings suggest that a complete and adequate statement of values and ethics would contain at least three clauses:

First, a statement of **commitment and adherence to the ethical standards articulated for the public service as a whole**. Adherence to this third set of ethical standards makes sense in that it seems both important that specific sectors such as the SITT acknowledge their commitment to these, and yet avoid having to articulate them in their own statements. Arguably, this point was one that emerged with greater clarity and importance as a result of current scandals in Ottawa, but yet it seems grounded in participants' general instincts about such matters.

Second, that the statement make reference to a clear set of **outward oriented values and standards of performance** that are specific to the SITT's role and mandate. In this sense, such a SITT-specific statement of values and ethics is *the* place to set out that which the SITT does, and to render this in a public context. Participants were clear in suggesting that such an outward-oriented clause should contain reference to the following:

- Good stewardship of public funds;
- A commitment to working in the public interest; and
- A commitment to principles such as responsibility, accountability and transparency.

Finally, and although not specifically mentioned in our groups (because such a discussion would have taken more time than we had), this clause might also articulate sector-specific standards and performance measurements.

Third, and last, *inward oriented values* that both reflect what is necessary and what is consistent with current management priorities and resources. Generally, our discussions suggest that much of the current values and ethics statement's references to this effect can be repeated, provided that they are re-articulated in a manner that reflects the limited resources that prevail currently. Minimally, these should include:

- A prescription for human resource practices (hiring, promotions, training, etc.);
- A prescription for standards relative to internal communications; and
- A prescription to the broad, value-based principles of equity, fairness, openness, and commitment to both official languages.

From participants' point of view, and provided that there be management commitment to implementing these values, these would be minimally sufficient to cover the important aspects of this inward-oriented aspect.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVE**

The overall objective of this study was to explore SITT employees' perceptions and assessment of their current Values and Ethics statement, stipulating both on its adequacy and failings. This exercise was undertaken so as to align a revised statement, one expected to be both shorter and of increased pertinence to the SITT, its mission and its employees.

## **SECTION III: METHODOLOGY**

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### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 CHOSEN METHOD**

Given the objectives set out for this study, focus group discussions were selected as the most appropriate method.

#### **3.2 NUMBER AND LOCATION OF GROUPS**

A total of four (4) focus groups were held, all in Ottawa. All four groups were held in February 2004; two of these groups were conducted in French and two in English.

#### **3.3 RECRUITING CRITERIA**

The recruiting process was conducted internally by SITT employees, but designed to provide for individual focus groups composed according to the following conditions and stipulations

- Roughly equal proportions of men and women;
- Individuals representing a spread of ages, and different SITT branches; and
- Individuals who were not too far apart on the organizational hierarchy.

#### **3.4 MODERATING AND ANALYSIS**

John Patterson of *Patterson Langlois Consultants* moderated all groups and was responsible for all analysis and report writing related to this research project.

**3.5 DISCUSSION GUIDE AND RECRUITING SCREENER**

A moderator's guide, which serves as a tool for outlining the nature and sequence of topics addressed in the sessions was submitted for client approval. A copy of this document is appended to this report.

## **SECTION IV: DETAILED RESULTS**

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### **4.0 DETAILED RESULTS**

#### **4.1 GENERAL REACTION TO THE CURRENT STATEMENT**

On the whole, participants were generally favourable in their commentary about the current values and ethics statement. More specifically, we observed the following:

- That the statement of values and ethics itself was widely endorsed, and dissent was apparent only with respect to a few minor points therein, or about the degree to which the statements were actually being lived up to.
- Most indicated that the current values and ethics statement is *generally* appropriate to the sector, but also evident in need of revision in specific places. This is not at all surprising to most participants, given that the current version dates back a decade.
- Some commentary and criticism about the language in the current statement. Occasionally, certain sentences were considered awkward. In other places, participants may have taken issue with certain choices in vocabulary. In the vast majority of examples, however, these critiques were directed at passages that were more at issue for reasons of relevance, suggesting that the edits themselves concern passages that participants would otherwise eliminate from the statement altogether.

From the commentary of participants about current internal conditions, there were notable findings about the sector's current adherence to these values:

- Overall, most participants suggest that they are unconcerned with the SITT's values and ethics, in the sense that they feel the sector lives up to high standards. These individuals tend to view the current clauses as appropriate, and that internal conditions and culture with the SITT workplace largely reflect an adherence to these values and ethics.
- It was also evident that opinions in this respect are not uniformly positive in all branches of the SITT. Participants from specific branches in the SITT indicated experiencing a greater frequency and degree of problems than others. Some individual participants were quick to point out specific issues and personal problems that to them constitute systemic evidence that not everything is in conformity with what the current statement prescribes. These opinions were generally expressed with slight negativity, occasionally spun with some irony, and in other cases with strong negativity.

Finally, a general consensus emerged (although some updating seems a good idea), but rather that there should be a stronger management commitment to achieving these goals. Regardless of whether participants subscribe to the view that the organization is at fault, or even only partially successful in implementing measures, most everyone agreed that it is imperative that there be visible, tangible and sustained commitment on the part of management.

Finally, our discussion also raised some important distinctions between values on one hand, and ethics on the other. The distinction seemed important, particularly because they allow for important nuances, and appropriate tolerances between two critical dimensions:

- Ethics were considered those clauses that which speak to *normative behaviour and clearly delineated codes of conduct*. What is important in this respect is that these standards be made explicit, and raised as immovable. They are to be adhered to, without fail or regard for circumstance.
- Values, on the other hand, clearly do and should have an aspirational component, and articulate where the organization is *heading*, as opposed to where it should be. In this light, participants consider it normal that there would always be some distance between the state of affairs currently, and the state of affairs aspired to.

In this sense, it was also clear that the current statement is more a reflection of the SITT's values, and even more so in that most participants widely recognize that there is a gap between what is happening now and what the statement prescribes.

## 4.2 CLAUSE-SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

### 4.2.1 Leadership

*“We focus on people, teamwork and results. We promote development of the Canadian information and communications industry.”*

Leadership was apparently not much at issue, in the sense that few participants objected to this clause, or even mentioned it in specific. The wording of this clause, and of words such as “focus” and “promote” suggest that leadership is being weighed here as a *value*. By the same token, “leadership”, as such, suggests little of ethical importance. A few participants noted that while it is true that the SITT promotes the development of the Canadian information and communications industry, this does not constitute an assertion of leadership. More specifically, we heard that “industry leads”, and that the SITT takes on a different role (it monitors, supports, regulates, etc.)

Additionally, the following specific comments and opinions emerged about this clause:

- To some, the statement itself seems to reflect a larger focus than simply on leadership, and arguably addresses this notion in both an internal and an externally oriented sense. To some, it was important that these two orientations be differentiated accordingly, which would suggest addressing each in separate clause.
- To some, this is not a particularly important clause in ethical terms. Some suggested that this clause would be more pertinent were it to prescribe something more clearly along the lines of a performance standard.

#### 4.2.2 *Client Focus and Quality Service*

*“We focus on our clients’ needs and the quality of our service is measured by their satisfaction. We publicize and adhere to our performance standards.”*

This clause was at issue in most groups, specifically because the statement suggests that client satisfaction should have such an important role in assessing the overall performance of the sector. While this client-service standard may have made sense at an earlier time (around the time the values and ethics statement was first written), it is evidently not so clear now that the SITT has this much of a service-oriented role. Only a portion of its activities actually involve contact with clients, and even less with clients who would in fact be served in a sense that would validate their satisfaction as a reasonable performance standard. This statement is particularly problematic for everyone who works in the SITT that has a regulatory role. In this context, client satisfaction is inappropriate as a measure of performance, as regulatory activities are often unsatisfying to individual clients.

In discussing this issue, the following additional considerations emerged with respect to how the SITT sector may construe notions of performance measurement:

- First, it is apparent that the SITT’s current activities are far broader and more diverse than was the case when this version of the values and ethics statements was written. This, at the very least suggests that a broader articulation of performance is warranted.
- Many of these same individuals felt that the term “clients” only partially encompasses the breadth of individuals and groups that have an interest in the sector’s performance.
- The above two notions were often followed by an awareness that it is difficult to define a singular audience for an organization as big and varied as the SITT, and that it is even more difficult to synthesize a measure that would please all of them.
- A few participants were quick to note that the above is precisely the issue, and precisely the standard that should be alluded to in the values and ethics statement: that the role of an entity such as the SITT is to balance interests, and render decisions that are appropriately weighted relative to the variety of interests that may in fact be in competition with one another. In this sense, other

notions are also important, namely good stewardship of public resources, value to Canadians and accountability.

### ***4.2.3 Innovation and Continuous Improvement***

*“We explore new ideas and diverse perspectives. We broaden our learning to improve our services. We encourage innovation and recognize success.”*

Overall, most participants were of two contradictory inclinations relative to this clause – believing it to be important and appropriate on one hand, and recognizing fundamental problems in how it is delivered to the organization in the current climate. Quite evidently, many participants simply do not believe that SITT has the resources (and some question the management desire) to ensure that this clause is adhered to, or even aspired to in any meaningful way. By the same token, most everyone believes that innovation and continuous improvement are essential to the overall effectiveness of the sector, and that any values and ethics statement would be incomplete without some reference to this aim.

More specifically, this clause provoked the following comments and observations:

- Most recognized the third sentence in the statement as a point of fact, or at least of intent, but it was not clear that recognition of success is an essential value.
- The assertion with respect to broadening learning was very problematic for many, largely because it appears to stand in marked contrast with the fact that the SITT has access to extremely limited funds for training.
- The first sentence in this clause was rarely discussed, and never separately from the point addressed above.

In light of the above, it seems clear that what is at issue in this clause is not the desirability or the pertinence of the overarching aim here, but rather the limitations surrounding the means toward that aim. In this light, it seemed apparent that the singular problem with this clause is that it prescribes an outcome in a manner that would also prescribe a certain level of resources, and a certain commitment to achieving this goal by way of specific means.

#### 4.2.4 *Commitment to Employees*

*“We respect individuality and treat all employees fairly. We share responsibility for employees’ training and development. We celebrate accomplishments of individuals and teamwork through recognition and awards.”*

Without a doubt, this was one, if not the most controversial clauses in the current statement, and largely so because of what a vocal minority views as a rather pronounced difference between what this clause prescribes and what the organization delivers.

While it was clear that many, if not most SITT employees were very positive in their evaluation of their employer’s commitment, there were nonetheless strong and recurring voices of dissent on this issue. The following constitute some of the more prevalent and consistent complaints that provide contrast to this particular clause:

- The view, held by many, that the organization tolerates considerable delays and shortcuts in its employee performance reviews. Apparently, some have gone for years without one, and others speak of having to write their own.
- The sense of some that the management of promotions and lateral movement within the organization often fails to adhere to the open and competition-driven protocols prescribed by the Public Service Commission. We heard more than a few complaints about pre-determined competitions, and manipulation of employment posting to suit given candidates.
- The claim, echoed by many, that large numbers of SITT employees have remained in term employment above and beyond what is considered tolerable for most departments.
- A perceived lack of commitment to training;
- A perceived unwillingness to look at, or consult on budgets, despite a climate where additional jobs and tasks are routinely demanded;
- Etc.

It should be noted, however, that it was *specific* aspects of this clause that were at issue, whereas others met with relative approval:

- Most seemed to feel that respect of individuality was adhered to, and indeed the vast majority indicated that they felt valued as individuals within their respective branch or group;
- Most felt that the assertion of shared responsibility for training was hypocritical in the current environment, where, according to some, training budgets have been cut to near nil; and
- While many did not react to the notion of celebrating accomplishment, a small but vocal minority pointed out that this particular expression of commitment pales in importance to the above. One group made the pointed comment that “valuing our opinions as professionals would be worth a lot more.”

Finally, we also observed that there were more *primary* aspects of commitment to employees, notably respect of Official Language policies, and an organizational valuation of employment equity that are omitted from this clause. Francophone participants, for their part, suggest that English predominates, and that much needs to be done before the SITT could be reasonably construed as living up to the spirit of bilingualism. It should be noted, however, that the conditions internally that belie problems with adherence to official language policies were not voiced as complaints, but rather as matter-of-fact observations that meetings invariably happen in English, and that communications are routinely written in English and are often not translated, and that bilingual designations are often manipulated. The issue of adherence to bilingual practices was not raised by Anglophone participants, and therefore not addressed with this group.

**4.2.5 Teamwork and Delegation / Communications and Consultation**

*“We take responsibility for our work individually and as team members. We strengthen the organization through interaction among employees throughout the sector.”*

*“We ensure the well-being, creativity and productivity of each individual and the entire organization through effective two-way communications.”*

Overall, participants’ reactions to both of these clauses suggest that they can be construed as variations on the theme of internal communication, and that both clauses are problematic for much the same complaints voiced relative to commitment to employees: While the principles articulated in both clauses are laudable, the organizational reality is apparently another matter. With this said, several specific points emerged as either important or controversial:

- The notion of taking responsibility for work: this specific phrase embodies a core concept of ownership and accountability that is obviously central to participants’ sense of values and ethics.
- The notion of strengthening the organization through interaction was something that most described as a reality, but that a few dissented vocally about. This would suggest that the SITT is experiencing considerable internal variance on this note, and that some branches are more prone to criticism in this sense than others.
- Effective two-way communication was a highly problematic assertion of organizational values for a small but vocal minority who describe the norm as highly one way, where decisions are typically made from the top down with insufficient consultation. These individuals tend to bemoan what they feel as an endemic depreciation of the expertise that has accumulated within the ranks of the SITT long-term employees.

Finally, and although somewhat extraneous to these two clauses, discussions at this point did provoke clear expressions of concern about what many feel is an alarming lack of attention to succession planning within the organization – an aspect that is arguably a function of these two clauses.

<b>DISCUSSION GUIDE OUTLINE</b>
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**Locations: February 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

**Client:SITT: Values and Ethics Statement**

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***Introduction (5 min.)***

1. Introduction of moderator
2. Subject: We're going to discussing your statement of "values and ethics".  
*Describe process briefly, objectives of the discussion.*
3. Explanation of the focus group process:
  - **Voluntary participation;**
  - **Strict confidentiality observed here**
  - role of moderator and participants;
  - I don't work for the government, no vested interest in how you respond to my questions
  - Your participation here is voluntary, but we are counting on you to help us out. We need your honest, straightforward opinions. Your opinions really do count.
  - expression of opinions;
  - length: 90 minutes or so: We're conscious that you have a working day to get (back) to...
4. Round-table introduction of participants: Current jobs, length of time in gov't, etc.

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## 1. WARM-UP

Tell me a little about what you've understood about this "statement of values and ethics" for SITT employees. (If unknown, briefly probe what this might mean/entail for them).

- We need to review, ensure that these 6 points are adequate.
- Desire to distil: bring down to the more essential points (to foster retention, internalization)
- Discuss articulation (wording) to ensure that the right tone is struck
- Our discussion today to follow a process: Start large; work our way down to the details.

## 2. BROAD DISCUSSION

Process begins with a spontaneous, "free" discussion of what SITT is all about, and what its organizational values and ethics really are. Participants are invited to comment, elaborate, brainstorm, critique, as they are so inclined. Example questions are as follows:

- Consider that I know nothing about you as an organization – your culture, how you do things, what's important to you (as opposed to the specific kind of work you do)... What do I need to know about you if I want to understand what you value? [LIST, PROBE, VALIDATE]
- What, in this list, is specific or unique to the SITT?
- What is essential to the SITT?
- Let's make the link between your work and this stuff: How does the specific nature of working in the field of "spectrum, information technologies and telecommunications" impact on your values? On your ethical standards?
  - Do you sense your responsibilities or mandates require specific values and specific kinds of ethics? Which? Why?
- What else comes to mind?

### 3. EVALUATION/DISTILLATION OF CURRENT VALUES STATEMENT

Invite participants to consider the current statement, particularly in light of the previous discussion. Example questions for each statement and the whole document as follows:

- Does this statement apply? How well? How exclusively to the SITT?
- Does this one sound distinct from the other? How so? How not?

Is/does this statement:

- Articulated properly? Can you think of a change that might make it clearer, more applicable to your work?
- Credible?
- Inspiring?
- Attainable?
- Evoke the highest standard?
- Cause you to rethink how you see your work?

Overall:

- Is there something missing? What?
- Are there statements here that evoke the same thing? Which?
- Which are the most essential notions we've talked here (compare, contrast, consider which, if any, are more essential/expendable, etc.)

**THANK AND TERMINATE**